

Australian higher education and the relevance of Newman

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Universities in Australia have entered a period of transition and of unresolved conflict. The conflict has at least two main practical dimensions. The first area of conflict concerns access to and quality in higher education. The university system has been restructured into the Unified National System (UNS) and simultaneously called upon to digest well in excess of 100,000 additional students without a commensurate increase in enabling resources. This is construed by some as the problem of system overload with quality in higher education being the inevitable casualty. According to one of Australia's leading educational policy makers Peter Karmel: "massive expansion of participation in higher education, the establishment of the UNS and the associated problems have created serious problems for the quality of higher education."¹

For others, by contrast, the restructuring is seen as the solution to the problem of "old school elitism". The increase in the numbers of students indicates unprecedented access to a social good. Thus Don Aitkin: "...with proper motivation and preparation virtually all people are likely to benefit from university education".² And there is yet a third alternative, namely that the UNS has not in fact brought unprecedented access to higher education. A corollary of this is that we need not accept that there has been substantial dilution of resources. According to Richard Sweet the increase in student numbers over this period has got very little to do with new incoming students. They account only for some 4% of growth in numbers. Rather it has to do with students already within the system undertaking new courses or upgrading their qualifications to degree status.³

The second area of conflict concerns university autonomy. Some value university autonomy and claim that it has been significantly eroded, and that there is the threat of further encroachments. One piece of evidence put forward is the existence of the government controlled mechanism for distribution of research funds, namely, the ARC. In this connection Simon Marginson reports: "Academics have lost some control over their research ... The real constraint has been through indirect intervention".⁴ The point here is that the (claimed) right of universities to determine what ought to be researched is diminished when they are obliged to try to devise research projects that meet with the approval of the ARC. An example of an as yet unrealised threat to university autonomy is the possibility of competency based testing by external bodies.⁵ But others are of the view that universities have not been delivering the intellectual goods, and that universities are not necessarily competent to determine what counts as quality in higher education.

These conflicts within and beyond the university system are not simply practical ones. For there is an unresolved theoretical or intellectual problem concerning the very nature and role of the University as an institution. It is, we suggest, quite unclear what the goals of the University in Australia are supposed to be. To some it is self-evident that its goals must be fundamentally economic, to others that it must bring about a society of equals. Others argue for a more traditional role of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. But the widespread acceptance of such simple-minded views as these serves only to point to the absence of a serious and well thought out conception of the role of the University. As Max Charlesworth has put

it: "We badly need a framework of theory ... to enable us to sort things out".⁶ Nor is it only Australian theorists who have identified the problem. The British educational theorist Ronald Barnett has this to say about modern university systems: "Put simply, we have no modern educational theory of higher education".⁷

Moreover the various practical conflicts about the Australian university system have been in part generated by the failure to resolve the theoretical problem. There is much discussion of quality assurance, excellence and competencies, but it takes place in a theoretical vacuum. Reassuring noises in the absence of real thought and justified values merely feed complacencies and encourage prejudice. Indeed we appear to be replicating the British mistake of the Thatcherite years. Paul Bourke has recently expressed the problem: "One notable feature of recent British experience is the absence of specification of goals for single institutions, and for the higher education system as a whole. It is a serious problem for British education that there is now pressure for quality controls and for evaluation but no agreed statement of a system-wide or institutional objectives".⁸

As a first step in the construction of an acceptable theory of the modern Australian University, we suggest a reconsideration of the intellectual roots of the modern university. A comprehensive review would have to examine such writers as Humbolt, Jaspers and Ortega y Gasset, but any such reconsideration would have to take into account the views of John Henry Newman. For reasons that will become clear we want to focus here only on Newman. Those views were elaborated in his seminal work, *The Idea of a University*.⁹

Newman's conception remains the most influential integrated vision of the University but is now widely misunderstood. We believe that Newman's model, defective though it is in certain respects, still has a great deal to offer as a theory of the University. In particular, it articulates and emphasises, as central to a university's mission, goals that tend otherwise to receive merely pious lip service. These goals include the pursuit of knowledge and understanding for its own sake as well as for the social and economic good of the wider society, and the cultivation of intellectual virtues such as logical thinking, and the habit of careful and balanced judgment. Newman's point here is often misunderstood. He holds that knowledge and understanding are goods in themselves, but rightly recognises that this constitutes no barrier to their also being instrumentally valuable.

In what follows a number of things need to be kept in mind. Firstly, a conception or idea or theory of the university is a normative notion. It is not a question of describing what the characteristics of modern universities in Australia in fact are, nor, for that matter, what they were when the universities were founded. Rather, it is a matter of working out what these features *ought* to be. Naturally, what they ought to be must be something they realistically could be. A normative or ideal conception is not a fanciful conception. We need to reject the proposition that universities cannot be other than they are - and with it the craven view that the nature and direction of the universities in this country is something to be determined by the most powerful forces of the day, be they bureaucratic or market forces.¹⁰ But it is equally important to avoid utopian sentimentality; it is mere self-indulgence to pine after what cannot possibly be.

Secondly, we will deploy the much maligned notion of knowledge. We are aware that it has become fashionable in some quarters of humanities and social science faculties to deny in effect that there is any such thing as knowledge. The ultimate sources of these denials are the writings of philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. These theorists, and some of the terminology they employ, have achieved a cult status in many Literary and Cultural Studies departments in American and Commonwealth universities. It is significant, however, that although they are studied in philosophy departments around the world, their impact on professional philosophy is relatively slight. Nonetheless, under the influence of this intellectual mood, we have senior academics in Australia, such as Professor Ann Curthoys, claiming that there are no facts and that the truth is endlessly deferred.¹¹ Others such as Ian Hunter seem to believe that there is no reliable knowledge since whatever is taken to be knowledge is only so taken in virtue of some set of power relationships rather than in virtue of objective evidential procedures.¹² We reject these views and have argued against them in detail elsewhere.¹³ But, given that they are propounded by well known senior academics, there is a need for us to make clear what our own position is. We wish to advance the arcane view that there is such a thing as knowledge which is both valuable and hard to come by. In saying this we are not denying that the construction of an acceptable theory of knowledge is a difficult philosophical task. (Though it is not a task that we can contribute to here.)¹⁴ Nor are we denying that absolute certainty - as opposed to probable truth - is an unrealistic goal and that much that passes for knowledge is in fact ideology. It is no part of our case that truth is always manifest; it is complex and hard to attain. Moreover, its attainment is closely connected to processes of reason, argument and discussion that are often subtle and intricate. Nonetheless, we are claiming that we can come to *know* that something that was believed to be knowledge was actually falsehood, or that such and such a view was mere ideology.

We believe the following truths need to be re-stated. Firstly, knowledge is to be distinguished from ideology and ignorance, and uncertainty and falsehood, and lies and superstition, and unevincenced speculation and playful make-believe. We would argue that a distinction of this type is required whatever theory or definition is adopted, since the adequacy of the theory or definition would be judged, in part, by its capacity to accommodate just such differentiations. Secondly, as a community we possess both theoretical and factual knowledge. Just how secure, extensive and profound such knowledge is, may be a matter of debate, but outside of the most remote Ivory Tower, it would never be denied that a distinctive feature of our age is its dependency upon, and its responsiveness to, often bewildering increases in knowledge. Thirdly, we can and do have knowledge of both the physical and non-physical worlds. We have knowledge of the social and psychological worlds; we have knowledge of the economic system, we have knowledge of the past. And there is this further point. There can be little doubt that the current Australian situation is one that demands both new knowledge and the elimination of falsehood and confusion. It demands knowledge of the workings of the economic system; it demands knowledge, and not ideological posturing, from either left or right, concerning the social and economic effects of government and opposition policies. Can we really afford the luxury of quasi-philosophical 'theory' telling us there can be no such thing as knowledge?

Newman's conception of the university

Newman's conception of a university is of a teaching institution in which the fundamental guiding concept is what he calls liberal knowledge. The point of a university is for academics to transmit, and students to acquire, liberal knowledge.

Thus Newman holds that universities ought to be exclusively teaching institutions. The acquisition of new knowledge is something that ought to take place in non-teaching research institutions. So Newman says (on page xxvii of the *Idea* 13) "Its [the university's] object ... is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than its

advancement".

Newman's notion of liberal knowledge is at the heart of his conception of the university. Essentially, liberal knowledge is knowledge informed by reason. It is not simply the knowledge gained by automatic processes such as sense perception: "Knowledge is called science or philosophy when it is acted upon, informed, or if I may use a strong figure, impregnated by Reason" (p.99).

Nor is liberal knowledge simply a collection of items of knowledge. Rather it is knowledge that has been structured; it is particular facts that have been related to one another. So the possessor of liberal knowledge has a whole structure of connected pieces of knowledge; in this sense, Newman's epistemology is holistic.¹⁶ If all someone knows of the European discovery of the Americas, for instance, are a few isolated facts such as that Columbus sailed across the Atlantic to land thereabouts in 1492, and that he had trouble persuading people that the voyage was worthwhile, then these items of knowledge, real enough as they are, do not constitute liberal knowledge. Moreover this structural requirement is tied to Newman's insistence on the role of reason. For it is reason that enables the connections between particular facts to be seen, and inferences to new facts to be made.¹⁷

Liberal knowledge is relatively comprehensive. Someone who has liberal knowledge is not a narrow specialist, or at least not simply a narrow specialist. Here Newman is not putting forward the absurd view that educated scientists must have a complete grasp of the whole of science, or the educated historian a complete hold on all of history. But he is emphasising the dangerous blinkering that intellectual specialisation can impose. The breadth of knowledge he advocates enables the possessor to have a vantage point from which to survey or investigate any particular question of fact or theory.¹⁸

Newman is committed to the view that liberal knowledge is a good in itself - indeed a very great good - and that it needs to be taught in order to be acquired. According to Newman liberal knowledge is difficult to acquire and necessitates years of training by teachers who have absorbed an appropriate intellectual tradition. Accordingly, Newman holds that the transmission of liberal knowledge is unlikely to take place reliably unless an institution is set up for the very purpose of such transmission. For Newman the University is the institutional embodiment of liberal knowledge. Or at least it ought to be. Newman is well aware that an institution calling itself a university might not have been established with this purpose or that one that might degenerate and no longer realise this purpose. Nor of course is he denying that there ought to be other institutions set up for other purposes, for example, technical training. His claim is rather that such institutions would not be universities.

On liberal knowledge being an end in itself Newman has this to say: "Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward... What the worth of such an acquirement [liberal knowledge] is, compared with other objects that we seek - wealth or power or honour or the conveniences and comforts of life, I do not here profess to discuss; but I would maintain, and mean to show, that it is an object, in its own nature so really and undeniably good, as to be the compensation of a great deal of thought in the compassing, and a great deal of trouble in the attaining" (p.91).

Newman holds that the University ought to teach all the main areas of human knowledge.¹⁹ His reason for this is that otherwise a detrimental imbalance will set in. Thus; "if you drop any science [i.e. discipline concerned with knowledge] out of the circle of knowledge, you cannot keep its place for it; that science is forgotten; the other sciences close up, or, in other words, they exceed their proper bounds, and intrude where they have no right. For instance, I suppose, if ethics were sent into banishment, its territory would soon disappear, under a treaty of partition, as it may be called, between law, political economy, and physiology" (p.65).

Newman also holds - contrary to what is often claimed about him - that the professions are a proper part of the knowledge that universities ought to teach. Thus: "In saying that Law or Medicine is not the end of a university course, I do not mean to imply that the

University does not teach Law or Medicine. What indeed does it teach if it does not teach something particular? It teaches all knowledge by teaching all branches of knowledge, and in no other way" (p.147).

Given his conception of liberal knowledge informed by reason it follows that teaching of liberal knowledge is essentially the inculcation of the intellectual virtues and the possessor of these virtues is, what he calls a 'gentleman'. Newman's notion of a gentleman is neither fundamentally gender specific nor tied to the state of the particular intellectual disciplines of his day. What is true that when Newman wrote, universities did not admit women²⁰ and Newman himself, though notably sympathetic to the plight of women, certainly shared some of the sexist assumptions of his age.²¹ But from this nothing follows about the adequacy or inadequacy of his conception of university as the inculcator of the intellectual virtues.

Two things need to be stressed in relation to these intellectual virtues.

Firstly, the intellectual virtues are to be distinguished from the moral virtues, though of course the intellectual virtues are virtues.²² (Virtues in this context simply means desirable character traits.) Indeed one of Newman's most important achievements in *The Idea of a University* is to delineate a conception of the intellectual life which distinguishes it from both the moral and the religious (or at least the Christian) life whilst showing areas of overlap. Morality is not entirely foreign to the ideals of the philosophical life since there is a certain character and accompanying code which the inquirer will tend to develop; it is the code and character of the gentleman. But the gentleman is nothing like the saint or the moral hero, and is certainly a very different type to the Christian saint.

Secondly, possession of the intellectual virtues amounts to a kind of intellectual empowerment of the individual. These virtues are only acquired after a great deal of disciplined work under the guidance of appropriately trained teachers. However, once acquired they enable an individual to think clearly and logically, and to communicate effectively and precisely. Moreover they predispose the individual to reflect carefully, to try to make objective judgments, and especially to back their own reason-based judgment in the face of external pressure and fashion. Thus: "To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactitude, sagacity, resource, address, eloquent expression, is an object as intelligible ... as the cultivation of [moral] virtue, while at the same time, it is absolutely distinct from it" (p.108).

Objections

(a) Research

As we have seen, Newman believes that research has no place within a university. In this matter Newman is surely wrong since many students need to be inducted into research activities and this can only be achieved in an environment where teachers are also researchers. However it is important to see that the idea of academics both teaching and researching is not alien to Newman's fundamental conception. For his conception of a university education involves the transmission of an intellectual culture through teaching, and the presentation of that culture's characteristic outlooks and virtues. But these depend upon students viewing their teachers as people who are not merely handing on lumps of established fact but who are participants in the intellectual debate, exploration and (to use a term of Oakeshott's) conversation of our culture and our species.

Newman was correct in pointing out some of the problems of the combination of teaching and research viz. inadequate time to research, inability of some teachers to produce original research and of some researchers to teach effectively. It may be that graduate schools are part of the answer to these sorts of problems. There are many complications that would need to be addressed in a fuller treatment of these issues, but what we are chiefly concerned to do here is to point out that a research function for universities, far from being inconsis-

ent with Newman's vision of higher education actually complements it.

(b) Anachronism

It is often claimed that Newman's conception of the University while possibly acceptable for his own times is now quite out of date.²³ But from the fact that Newman was writing in a different historical period it simply does not follow that he has nothing to tell us about universities in our day. It would indeed be highly unlikely that he would have offered a theory which we could simply take over in its entirety and not have to adjust to meet our particular circumstances and needs. But quite often conceptions of another period are relevant to us today. This is especially likely where there has been a considerable degree of continuity of institution as is the case with universities.

Newman himself was aware of and stressed the need to apply ideals to particular circumstances. At any rate the real issue is whether his conception has something important to teach us today. And whether or not his conception has something to offer is a matter to be decided by looking closely at his conception in relation to our needs.

We have indicated one important deficiency, namely his rejection of research as part of a university. But we have seen that this deficiency can be remedied without doing violence to Newman's central insights. We also believe that his position has a number of strengths. Not the least of these is the focus on the intellectual virtues since, presumably, any decent society is interested in the empowerment, including the intellectual empowerment, of its citizenry.

(c) Utility

It is often objected that Newman in stressing liberal knowledge for its own sake fails to understand that universities must be useful to the wider society. This objection pertains both to social and economic utility.

Let us look at economic utility first. Newman is keen to sing the praises of what he calls the philosophical cast of mind as something absolutely central to university education, but he does not see this outlook or set of attitudes, as restricted to any particular subject matter. As we have already seen he is perfectly clear that professional disciplines have their place in the university, as they had from its medieval beginnings: what he is concerned to stress is that in addition to professional training one must aim at the intellectual virtues.

One central value of higher education is its power to enlarge the understanding and imagination, to produce a perspective on the particular facts and skills which are learned. This includes an understanding of the limits and complexities of present understanding; in the professions, as elsewhere, it is important to know how little you know even when you are on top of your subject. But none of this involves any essential hostility to professional education.

Other central values of higher education stressed by Newman are those intellectual virtues that might be termed rational capacities. Indeed these intellectual virtues are precisely what employers are now beginning to realise are necessary for the economic system. The capacity to think logically, to communicate effectively, to focus on the key points in any issue, to absorb new knowledge speedily; these are in fact the necessary ingredients for the bringing into existence of the much vaunted 'clever country'. But Newman is right to stress that these virtues or rational capacities are hard won and only reliably acquired by large numbers of people in an institutional setting which has the appropriate intellectual traditions and which has teachers who have spent long years absorbing these traditions. These traditions and teachers cannot simply be wished into existence by setting up a committee and drawing up a report in which these rational capacities are pronounced desirable.

Let us look now at the question of social utility. Intellectual empowerment of the sort Newman advocates is not only of enormous benefit to the individuals who gain it, but also to the major institutions of society. Schools, the media, the legal system, the bureaucracy, government, would all benefit from an injection of graduates with Newman's intellectual virtues.

At this point there is a tendency to claim that Newman's conception admits of no transformative social role for universities and that universities therefore support the *status quo* and hence many injustices.

It may be true that Newman tends to see the social role of university education entirely in terms of the educated individual's social responsibilities which he or she ("the gentlemen" of both sexes) exercises in part as a result of education. What is lacking in Newman's thought here is the idea that the university as an institution has such responsibilities and that it should bear them in mind in the organisation of its teaching and research, and in its self-understanding. But such social responsibilities should not be construed as necessarily giving comfort to the *status quo*. It is no accident that universities have often been centres of social criticism, and this is a fact insufficiently stressed by Newman. If this is an "indirect effect" of the "direct end" of University education then it is intimately related to the development of the intellectual which Newman saw as that direct end and so eloquently described. These social orientations, of course, have their dangers but they create an important intellectual vocation, and there is no necessity that it should obtrude upon or hinder the central task sketched by Newman.

So Newman's defence of the intrinsic value of intellectual culture, philosophy, or more generally the depth of understanding which he believed University education to principally aim at, is not intended to disparage its utility or even particularly to circumscribe the studies which might give rise to it. He seems to have thought that it was largely an empirical matter whether some study could allow such understanding or not. Consequently, the utility objection hardly touches Newman's position since Newman is opposed to the utilitarians, not because they stress utility, but because they stress nothing else. He insists that knowledge is an end in itself but rightly sides with Aristotle in also insisting that what is an end in itself may also be an instrumental end. Newman is surely correct in holding that knowledge is one of those goods which is valuable in itself as well as being valuable as a means to other goods.

(d) Elitism

It is sometimes claimed that Newman's conception is elitist because on his conception universities are accessible only to a few.

The glowing account that Newman gives of the value of university education should starkly pose the social problem of making sure that as many people as possible gain access to such a central human good. The fact that the problem is often posed by those who conceive of the good as merely instrumental (for getting a better share of wealth and power, or for correcting social wrongs) should not obscure the fact that there should be just as great, if not greater, a demand for the fair availability of such a good from those who do not view it in merely instrumental terms. This is one reason for insisting that Newman's idea of a university is not necessarily "elitist".

Nonetheless, his characterisation of the value inherent in university education raises the question of the possibility of this good being universally or even extensively distributed.

This difficulty is very relevant to present Australian circumstances. Governments, and indeed the Australian community, seem at present unprepared, or perhaps unable, to provide the massive funding necessary to give a university education to all or even a majority of the population of this country. Therefore universities remain institutions catering for an elite. Only a minority receive the benefits of a university education. This is regrettable, but it seems to be a fact of political life for the foreseeable future.

However, there is a clear tendency to try to have it both ways; to substantially increase the number of students while holding back on a commensurate increase in funding. Ultimately this is an unworkable, indeed an incoherent, policy. Flooding under-resourced universities with more and more of less and less capable people will eventually eliminate the possibility of anyone acquiring the good which a university exists to foster.

We do not doubt that many more people are capable of enjoying the

benefits of a genuine university education than Newman could have imagined; equally, we do not doubt that Newman would have been delighted to find that that was so. Yet the question has not been seriously faced by contemporary university "reformers" of just how far access can be taken without so devaluing what is on offer in universities as to make access unimportant and university education a misnomer.

Conclusion

Our conclusion is that Newman's conception of the University contains much that is of permanent value and also provides a useful starting point in the process of developing a satisfactory theory of the modern Australian university. Newman's conception of the University is of an institution which has as its fundamental aim the pursuit of knowledge through research and understanding both for its own sake as well as for reasons of utility. This we take to be undoubtedly true, though with the obvious qualification that the discovery of knowledge as well as its transmission is part of the aim. Newman is also right to stress the importance of generalist knowledge and of the intellectual virtues as well as specialised knowledge and specific intellectual skills. The acquisition of the intellectual virtues and of a relatively comprehensive framework of knowledge are necessary both for the intellectual empowerment of individuals and for the ongoing utility of graduates in the economic and social system. While all this is a useful starting point, it leaves a number of important theoretical questions to be answered. Some of these are as follows. What are the core areas of knowledge that ought to be taught in a university? What are the core areas of knowledge that ought to be researched in a University? What specifically are the intellectual virtues? What is the appropriate mix of generalist and specialist content and skills that ought to be taught in a university? Who ought to have a University education?

Our final question is a reflective one about all the previous questions, and is the subject of our forthcoming paper on academic freedom²⁴: Who ought to be the ones to decide the answers to any or all of the above questions?

Notes

1. Professor Peter Karmel "Quality in Higher Education", *Sir Robert Menzies Oration on Higher Education* delivered at Melbourne University on 28th October 1992 (p.7 of circulated text).
2. Don Aitkin "Uni access versus the old school" in "Higher Education Supplement" *Australian* 11/11/92.
3. Richard Sweet "Assessing, shaping and influencing demand for higher education" in (ed) John Anwyll *Centre for Study of Higher Education Spring Lectures 1992* (Centre for Study of Higher Education, Melbourne University 1992).
4. Simon Marginson "Has Dawkins reduced academic freedom?" in the "Higher Education Supplement" *Australian* 3/9/92.
5. Karmel is one who expresses this concern. "Quantity and Quality in Higher Education" *op.cit.*
6. Max Charlesworth "From Dawkins to where?" paper presented at the AITEA 1992 conference in Ballarat on October 1st 1992. (p.16 of circulated text.)
7. Ronald Barnett *Idea of Higher Education* (Bristol: Open University Press, 1990) p.4.
8. Paul Bourke *Quality Measures in Universities* (Canberra: Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, 1986) p.11.
9. John Henry Newman *Idea of a University* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947)
10. For comments on this, see Tony Coady "Hunting and Gathering in the New University" in *Aedon*, Vol 1, No 1, (1993); and also his "Critical Surrender and the New Universities" in *Eureka Street*, Vol 3, No 5, (1993).
11. Ann Curthoys "Higher Education Supplement" *Australian* 14/10/92.
12. Ian Hunter "Personality as Vocation" in his *Accounting for the Humanities* (Brisbane: Institute for Cultural Policy Studies, 1991) pp.7-66.
13. Seumas Miller and Richard Freadman *Rethinking Theory: A Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1992). Parts of C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) are also relevant here.

14. Some contribution to the task, with an emphasis upon certain social dimensions of knowledge, has been made in a recent work by one of the authors. See C.A.J. Coady *Testimony*, *op cit*.

15. Hereafter all references to Newman come from the *Idea op.cit*. We shall put the page references in the text of our paper.

16. *Idea* pp.40-1

17. *Idea* p.100

18. *Idea* p.147

19. *Idea* p.11

20. It is worth noting that Oxford did not admit women to full membership until 1920 and Cambridge not until 1946.

21. Indicative of the positive aspects of Newman's attitude is a letter to his niece, Jane Mozley, in February 1884. Newman wrote: "It is one of the best points of this unhappy age, that it has made so many openings for the activity of women". Quoted in Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988, p.734).

22. Contrary to theorists such as Minogue and D.L. Thompson.

23. Charlesworth *op.cit*. p.4.

24. Tony Coady and Seumas Miller "Academic Freedom". See also Seumas Miller "Academic Freedom in South Africa" *Australian Universities' Review* (December 1991).

Reviews

Pastoral shades: Sidney Orr and the eroticisation of teaching

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Gross Moral Turpitude: The Orr Case Reconsidered by Cassandra Pybus
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Australia's Dreyfus or a leering bat?

Not so long ago it might have seemed neither absurd nor tasteless to imagine Sydney Orr's misadventures becoming the subject of a film by Peter Weir: the tertiary sector's answer to *Dead Poets' Society*.¹ Picture the early scenes: Orr at Melbourne University, derided by his Head of Department for his 'emotional' reading of Plato: hated as a teacher by most of his students for his tendency to digress from the 'set texts'; but loved by a select coterie, who fell under the spell of his 'glittering eyes' and his libertarian philosophy of love; surrounded by scandal on account of the *ménage à trois* in which he sought experimentally to live out this philosophy (the 'writing up' of which in a series of small confessional articles for a non-academic magazine comprised virtually his only published work).

Then, in 1952, comes Orr's appointment to a professorship in philosophy at the stuffy, provincial University of Tasmania. A courageous open letter, complaining about conditions at the university (which precipitated an official government enquiry) is shortly followed by his 'political' dismissal. This is justified on the basis of trumped-up charges that he had seduced a student, Suzanne Kemp, harassed (in a non-sexual manner) a mature-aged, male student, and mistreated a less senior colleague. The final section of the film would be taken up with his fight for reinstatement: notably, his unsuccessful appeal to the Tasmanian Supreme Court in 1956 and to the High Court in 1957; the successful international campaign on his behalf to boycott all new positions at the University of Tasmania; and his widespread construction as Australia's 'Dreyfus'.

Once upon a time ... meaning prior to the publication of Cassandra Pybus' persuasive work of historical revisionism. Today, it is not a romantic film-maker but that unconscionably harassed student and gifted painter, Edwin Tanner, to whom we turn for our picture of Sidney Orr. In *Gross Moral Turpitude's* cover illustration Orr is portrayed by Tanner, in Pybus' words, as 'a leering bat', hovering over a blackboard with a heart drawn on it; next to it, a girl, seated apart from the rest of the student audience, the object of Orr's obscene gaze. Nor is he the only protagonist in the affair to be given the lie in the light of Pybus' research. Both here and abroad, a great number of his supporters, including eminent intellectuals and top university officials, are exposed as knaves or fools, whilst the majority academic view that Orr had been unjustly dismissed has been shown to be simply mistaken.

If *Gross Moral Turpitude* has attracted so much attention, this is not only because of the notorious place of the Orr case in Australian intellectual-cultural history but also on account of its resonances in contemporary 'personal politics'. Pybus herself foreshadows this way of reading her work, linking it (unhelpfully in my view)² to the issue

of sexual harassment (p.212). Here it is not sexual harassment but recent debate over consensual sexual relations between staff and students in tertiary educational institutions which provides the focus for the ensuing discussion of the contemporary lessons of the Orr case. I intend to approach this problem by first opening up an aspect of the case itself which has received less attention than it warrants; namely, Orr's pedagogical and intellectual style.

What sort of teacher did Orr fail to be?

« If the results of Pybus' research amply justify the University of Tasmania's decision to dismiss Orr (if not the way it went about it), its implications are that the shame which for so long hung over the university in connection with Orr's dismissal is only transferred undiminished to the matter of his appointment in the first place. How could such a conspicuous charlatan (without a serious publication to his name, attracting only the most unenthusiastic references, etc. etc.), have ever secured a professorship? Pybus also leaves us in little doubt as to the way in which the University's 'God-Chancellor', Sir John Morris, blatantly fixed his appointment (pp.203-7). It seems that he did so in the belief that the University's fledgling philosophy department needed someone to propagate a Christian view of moral issues and to stand up against communism and the linguistic philosophy then dominating Australian philosophy departments (Pybus, pp.203-7).

Does this last detail not suggest that to give in to indignation over Orr's lack of professional qualifications is to pass too quickly over the question of what can count as qualifying one to teach philosophy? The point is not whether, to the contrary, Orr's approach to teaching has been unjustly maligned but rather what type of pedagogical approach it was.

In other words, what was it that allowed Orr's whole approach to teaching, including his sexual and other predations, to possess even the appearance of a valid pedagogy? The answer, I suggest, lies in the resemblances between aspects of his teaching alluded to in the 'glossy' version of the case with which this article began and certain pastoral techniques of character-formation which have as their aim the shaping of a dialectical, whole self. It is in terms of such techniques that we can at least make sense of Orr's attempts to bring philosophical texts hitherto taught in far more formal, rationalist ways into the service of a spiritual transformation of the reader. In this case it's the students' sexual subjectivity that is to be freed up and yet spiritualised through an 'emotional' reading of Plato. Pybus' tantalisingly brief comments allow us to glimpse the outlines of a 'confessional' approach to teaching which rests upon blurring distinctions between the status and personal comportment of the teacher (and head of department) and those appropriate to relations of friendship or psychological counselling.

In short, whilst there is no getting away from the facts of Orr's tawdry and opportunistic male chauvinism, or from many other personal failings which were reflected in his teaching, his sexual hunting ground was in some ways the product of an instituted pastoral pedagogy. In the course of the twentieth century such aesthetic and therapeutic techniques of personal formation have established them-